GETTING YOUR PRIORITIES RIGHT

October 15, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 16:1-13

"No servant can serve two masters;...You cannot serve God and mammon."
-Luke 16:13 (RSV)

In his memoir, The Good Times, Russell Baker, New York Times correspondent and columnist, begins with an amusing observation.

"My mother, dead now to this world but still roaming free in my mind, wakes me some mornings before daybreak. 'If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a quitter.' I have heard her say that all my life. Now, lying in bed, coming awake in the dark, I feel the fury of her energy fighting the good-for-nothing idler within me who wants to go back to sleep instead of tackling the brave new day...

"Silently I protest. I am not a child anymore. I have made something of myself. I am entitled to sleep late.

"'Russell, you've got no more gumption than a bump on a log. Don't you want to amount to something?'

"She has hounded me with these same battle cries since I was a boy in short pants back in the Depression.

"Amount to something!

"Make something of yourself!

"Don't be a quitter!"

Baker tells how in 1954, at the age of 29, he was assigned to cover the White House - as close to heaven as a correspondent could get. He went home to Baltimore to tell his mother about it.

"I should have known better. 'Well, Russ,' she said, 'if you work hard at this White House job you might be able to make something of yourself.'" [p. 7-8]

The problem for Baker was that he wanted to write for a newspaper and beginners, police reporters, were paid very small salaries. Only top correspondents made money. One time he overheard one of the paper's top

foreign correspondents wire for expense money - $5,000. Baker was very impressed. Later in the book Baker relates how his boss at the Baltimore Sun invited him to lunch at an elite private club to announce his new assignment in London. Baker was dazzled by the place and describes his memories of the waiter, table cloth, the drinks, and finally, the new status - a foreign correspondent who could actually wire the home office for $5,000 in expense money. That really was heaven!

The book strikes a familiar chord with people whose values, hopes, dreams and expectations have been shaped by the American experience in the middle of the twentieth century, which means most of us. We either lived through the Great Depression, or were raised by parents who did, or by parents whose values were very much shaped by their parents who were forever marked by that economic trauma: Frugality, responsibility, a suspicion of credit and an aversion to indebtedness, most of all a sense that survival means hard work, absolute responsibility, and the willingness to delay gratification and to work very, very hard. Russell Baker's mother's litany - "make something of yourself, work hard, don't quit, get ahead" is familiar to all of us, I suspect, and still drives many of us.

It may, in fact, define us more accurately than we suspect, or even want to know about.

One of the most perceptive analysts of the human condition in our century was H. Richard Niebuhr, who taught at Yale Divinity School, brother of the more widely known Reinhold Niebuhr. H. Richard Niebuhr was a theologian whose focus was ethics. He taught that behind our specific and relative values, we have a center of value, on the basis of which the lesser values gain their meaning. "That center of value," said H. Richard Niebuhr, "is essentially theological, whether or not we are traditionally religious. It is our god, the object of our loyalty and worship. It is our theological frame of reference... it gives meaning and shape to our lives. Furthermore, everybody believes ultimately in something... everybody has a center of value." Russell Baker is candid enough to identify his mother's litany's as his center in a way that helps us identify our own. The point is that each of us has one - a center of value which forms our other values, which gives meaning to our lives... which shapes our hopes and dreams and expectations for the future, even our ultimate future. That is to say, each of us has a god.

And that is the point of what is arguably the most troublesome story Jesus ever told: certainly one of the most intriguing. If the "charming rascal" is one of your favorite literary character types; if you love Travis McGee, you're going to love the man in this story. He's a steward, an estate manager actually, in the employ of a wealthy land owner. The land owner leases his property to tenant farmers whose rent is a percentage of the produce they harvest from the land. The steward's job is to manage the systems for the owner: negotiate the percentages, keep the books, collect the produce at harvest time. It is an important job. The owner depends on his steward's effectiveness and most of all, honesty.

This particular steward, said Jesus, was charged with wasting his master's goods. The owner called him in, gave him notice, told him to bring the books up to date, clear out his desk, move on. He was fired.

Notice that he does not argue, explain or plead his case. Instead, without wasting a moment, he goes to his office, summons the tenants one by one, who do not know apparently that he has been fired and announces that the percent they owe has been reduced and the landlord has lowered the rent. The implication is that he, the steward, has been instrumental in arranging this happy surprise. Note how he is careful to be sure that their handwriting, not his, appears on the ledger. The farmers are delighted. Nothing like this has ever happened before.

Now the land owner discovers what has happened and he has only two options actually. He can jail the dishonest steward and reverse the damage done - but there's already a celebration going on in the town square. His tenant farmers are, at the moment, perhaps at the pub, lifting their glasses to toast his generosity and his steward's kindness. He decides not to tell them it is a mistake and that their good friend is under arrest.

The other option is to absorb the loss, essentially to pay the price himself for his steward's salvation. That is what he does. He shows unusual mercy - amazing grace - and then he commends the steward for his shrewdness, his sense of priority.

It is a subtle point. But Jesus often used slightly unsavory characters to make it. Prodigal sons, unjust judges, uncaring neighbors, all point to God's amazing and dependable graciousness. God's unexpected and always surprising willingness to love us and accept us. This man is not a moral model for anyone. But, to his everlasting credit, he does know what the most important issue in life is and where to take it. He is commended because he knows where to go for his safety, security, salvation. He knows somehow that he can depend, utterly and ultimately on the generosity and grace of his master. [See Poet and Peasant, Kenneth Bailey, p. 86 ff]

And then, in case we miss the point, Luke reports a lovely saying of Jesus':

"No servant can serve two masters,
you cannot serve God and mammon."

Mammon - what a great Biblical word. It means "wealth, money, prosperity, profit," says one dictionary. It's money, but it's more than money. It's the mystique of money, the essence of wealth. It's money in capital letters. It's the gorgeous ads in the Sunday supplement... it's trudging across an acre of lush Kentucky Blue Grass to borrow a cup of Johnny Walker Black Label from your neighbor. It's a car you never quite get to see because its name is Infinity. It's a culture that invests its most creative architecture no longer in cathedrals but vertical shopping malls. Mammon is whatever shapes your dreams. It is your center of value perhaps. It is whatever you worship. It is whatever you expect to save you.

Mammon is defined differently by Russell Baker and children of the Depression as accomplishment, success, security. Comedian George Carlin, who would probably be surprised to be used as a sermon illustration, defines it as "stuff" - the accumulation of things for which we must

provide space, shelves and drawers and garages and walls and cabinets and boxes and trunks. I discovered this summer that mammon is defined for most of us, at least partially, by the word comfort. Being comfortable is more important than we realize, therefore more powerful in actually determining our values and our behavior. I hadn't realized how deep that is for us. I learned it at the Outward Bound School, Hurricane Island, Maine, on a five and one-half day expedition with thirty other middle-age, comfortable people. From 5:30 a.m. dips in the cold, 52 degree, coastal waters, to three days and nights on a thirty foot open life boat without any of the amenities which we simply take for granted, Outward Bound eloquently demonstrates how very much of our energy, imagination and resources we are willing to invest in comfortability and how very much of life we may miss in the process. It is not a lesson most of us enjoy learning. But it is an important one. "I was comfortable" is not a particularly inspiring epitaph after all.

Another contemporary variation on the old theme of mammon might be called "self-fulfillment." In a study of American Mainline Religion, the authors report on a David Yankelovich opinion poll to the effect that 80% of us are in some way involved in the "quest for fulfillment." 17% of us are intense seekers... 17% "spend much of their lives assessing and reassessing their personal lives, their jobs, friends, mates, from the perspective of the needs and wants of the self." Yankelovich says they tend to be under 35, unmarried, college educated, white collar professionals. They are the ones most preoccupied with finding spiritual, marital, physical wholeness through diet, exercise, meditation, psychotherapy - many are candidates for such quasi-spiritual activities as primal therapy or "EST."

Thus, the authors conclude, "Given the intensity of their quest, many have stumbled into the 'fulfillment trap'... wanting more than they can have and putting self ahead of social relationships." [Roof and MacKinney, p. 47]

Jesus would put it this way - "You cannot serve two masters." Theologically, we are here talking, thinking, you can't serve God and mammon. It's not that mammon is bad. Jesus has been consistently misunderstood on that point. He did not condemn wealth in and of itself. He did not condemn ambition or hard work. He told one wealthy young man to sell all he had and give to the poor, but that was a particular prescription, not a universal model. What he said here is that wealth, or any form of mammon, doesn't work if we look to it for our salvation. It's that simple. It doesn't work. And there is a sense that people who have it know it best.

Harvey Cox observes that there is a revival of Eastern spirituality in Western culture precisely because materialism doesn't work as a source of ultimate meaning or salvation. In a particular perceptive section in a new book on comparative religions, Professor Cox notes that Young Urban Professionals are "victims of a painful overload of contradiction" between the stated value systems of our society and the actual values which operate in the marketplace. "They are pulled apart. In family and religious life they have been taught to share and cooperate and even to love, but the world of classroom and market requires them to connive and compete if they

wish to succeed." The young adults who chose to spend a beautiful October Saturday yesterday cleaning, painting and rehabbing apartments of Cabrini-Green are looked at with curiosity and often scorn by colleagues.

Cox says one of the appealing resolutions for many thoughtful young adults is a vigorous, disciplined, cult-type religiosity which provides "a chance to test and stretch themselves as opposed to the debilitating pursuit of comfort that is the chief characteristic of consumer culture." [Many Mansions, p. 188]

Mammon doesn't work. The first rule of economics someone said is that "you can't have everything." You have to choose. Individuals and nations. Priorities must be established. In theological terms, a god must be chosen and served.

Saying yes to God, that is, means saying no to other gods. It is a matter of very basic theology. In his monumental work, Does God Exist, Hans Kung makes the point eloquently: to believe in the one God is to "repudiate the many gods that are worshipped today... the great God Mammon or the great God Sex or the great God Power or the great God Success, or the great God Nation, or the great God Party." [p. 619]

The trouble with us, the Bible concludes, is that we are always getting our priorities confused. We are looking for the meaning of our lives in the wrong places. In the Biblical idiom the trouble with mammon is not that it is evil. The trouble is that it doesn't work. In fact, all that mammon is good for is producing worry and anxiety. If your job is the most important thing in the world to you, you're going to worry a lot about it. If it's your house, your automobile, your position in the community, your sex life, your children, you're probably worrying a lot.

One of the most important lessons of life and one of the basic insights of Judeo-Christian religion is this: if you try to squeeze something infinite out of something finite, you will not only be unsuccessful and frustrated, you will very likely squeeze the life out as well. One of the lessons in life that parents must learn is that if children are expected to provide peace, happiness, contentment, salvation, the load will be too heavy for the relationship to bear. If your ego, your sense of self-worth, is dependent on your child's accomplishments, athletically, academically, economically or socially, the child involved is being asked to carry a very heavy load. In fact, it won't work. Or if your happiness is dependent on your apartment or automobile, you're in trouble spiritually. And the ultimate irony is that if you look to mammon, the mystique of wealth, prosperity and security to provide happiness, peace and salvation, you probably will not ever enjoy very much of what you already have.

The truth of the matter is that you and I only deeply enjoy what we don't ultimately need. The truth is that it is not possible to enjoy that which you depend on. Psychologists know that obsessive need - dependence - is not a strong basis for a healthy relationship. The truth is that children are far better off when parents do not need them for ego fulfillment. And they are far more enjoyable - which may be one of the reasons grandparents so absolutely enjoy their grandchildren.

The truth is that you cannot enjoy anything if you load it up with expectations and demands and insist that it reward you with happiness, peace and contentment. You can't enjoy anything that exerts that kind of power over you. You can't enjoy your sexuality if you look to it to demonstrate your masculinity or femininity or attractiveness or youth. You wont' enjoy romance or friendship or family affection if you need it to prove something to yourself. And mammon as money... Frederick Buechner quips that "There are people who use up their entire lives making money so they can enjoy the lives they have entirely used up." [Whistling in the Dark, p. 80]

Jesus told a story about a man who was as flawed as anyone in the Bible and as human as anyone here this morning, but a man who knew at least where his salvation would be found. Jesus told that little story to the people he was preparing for discipleship. He concluded it by teaching them and us that it is a matter of very great importance that we get our priorities straight.

If we give our hearts to mammon, whatever that might be for us, we will not be happy and, in the process, we will miss the saving miracle of God's unusual generosity, God's amazing grace, God's unconditional love for us which is, he taught, the only source of our salvation...

Somehow in this season of stewardship - when this church and all churches ask us to think seriously about our resources, our relationship to our money, our decision about how to use it - this basic matter can't get lost. It is not simply an issue of making pledges so that budgets may be established. It is very much a matter of looking at and deciding our priorities... deciding at heart, who we will serve: What our center of value will be: Who will be our God.

The radical word of Christian faith, to those would-be disciples in first century Galilee and would-be disciples in the 20th century is that in order to experience salvation we must say "no" to all the other gods who clamor for our love and hope and faith and enthusiasm and passion, and say "yes" to the God who has loved us into being and came to be among us and to teach us and to live and die with us and to rise again for us in Jesus Christ.

We are God's top priority it would seem. God has decided to love us, to give us life and the capacity for love and joy and peace. God has decided to give us life eternal, life in all its fullness, life blessed by the beauty of art and music and the Indian Summer days of October, life with all its potential for creativity and accomplishment, life with its wonderful capacity for love and passion and intimacy and ecstasy, life - which is Jesus Christ, is diminished by nothing, limited and hemmed in ultimately by no thing, not even death. That's what God has decided about us, we believe. And after all the deciding, God made one more decision - namely to allow us the final one - the big one - the only one actually - Who we will serve... Who will be our God...

Amen.

10/15/89